

## Book Review

**Dubi Nanda Dhakal.** *Darai Texts* (Languages of the World/Text Collections 32). München: LINCOM Europa, 2013, 132 pp.

Reviewed by **George van Driem**, Linguistics Institute, University of Bern Länggassstrasse 49, Postfach 999 CH 3000 Bern 9, Switzerland. E-mail: [vandriem@isw.unibe.ch](mailto:vandriem@isw.unibe.ch)

DOI 10.1515/jsall-2015-0015

Brian Houghton Hodgson (1857: 321–327) was the first linguist to report on the Darai language, which he mentioned under the names “Daḍhi”, “Dare” and “Dahi”. Later, George Grierson (1916, IX (IV): 18–19) wrote disparagingly of the Darai, saying that “all that they do is to speak bad Khas-kurā”. In fact, the Darai language is far more interesting than defective Nepali could ever be. Kotapish and Kotapish (1975) provide exciting but incomplete documentation of the Darai biactantial verbal agreement system, and the Darai conjugational paradigm appears to exhibit material similarities with several salient morphemes of the Bote and Maithili verbal agreement systems. Despite the intrinsic fascination of this language, its relatively easy geographical accessibility and its partial intelligibility to researchers already familiar with Nepali, Darai as a language has been largely neglected. Dhakal’s corpus of Darai texts, despite its modest girth, therefore represents a substantive contribution to the documentation of the Darai language.

Dhakal’s book is 132 pages in length, 118 pages of which are filled with text corpus and 1½ pages of which are filled with kinship terms. The book consists of four chapters, and the 118 pages of Darai texts comprise the third chapter, which makes up most of the book. The first two chapters are entitled “Background” and “Typological sketch”, and the fourth chapter is entitled “Notes”. After a preface and a table of contents, the author succinctly provides on one single page an overview of all of the abbreviations and all of the grammatical morpheme glosses used in the texts (p. iv).

The first chapter begins by broaching the topic of the origin of the Darai and the etymology of the name Darai. The author discusses various proposals, but does not hazard a guess himself, nor does he favour any of the conjectures which have previously been aired in the literature. One of the proposals which he mentions is the etymology put forward by Gautam and Magar in 1994. This etymology could have been more lucidly presented by Dhakal if he had chosen either to transliterate written Nepali properly or to transcribe Nepali phonologically. The proposal essentially entails that the Nepali form *Darāi* represents a straightforward regular adjectival form of

Nepali *darā*, the term denoting a diffuse agglomeration of villages, often comprising an administrative sub-unit within a district, particularly in those very districts where the Darai happen to reside.

As for the etymology of the ethnonym, the matter is shrouded in the imprecision of transcription. In the Nepali literature on this language and its speakers, the name *Darai* written in Devanāgarī script occurs spelt both as the trisyllabic forms *Darāi* and *Darāī* as well as in the shape of the disyllabic form *Darai*. People of this language community very often use their ethnic designation as a surname in official documents, and usually they spell this surname as *Darāi* in Devanāgarī script. In this context, the author neglects to discuss the fact that in his own texts the autonym is recorded consistently as [dərəi] (pp. 60, 65, *passim*). If the recorded forms have been correctly transcribed, then this pronunciation would correspond to the orthography *Darai*. This discrepancy presents an obvious lingering issue which should be clarified by future research. After some generalities on the Darai, Dhakal provides a 1½-page list of Darai kinship terms and then introduces his three principal informants.

Chapter 2 is a “typological sketch” devoted to Darai grammar. Half of this 3-page sketch is devoted to Darai phonology, whilst the concise section on morphology makes no mention of the Darai biactantial agreement system. Essentially, it is fair to say that the Darai phoneme inventory is basically equivalent to that of modern spoken Nepali. Dhakal, however, labels the four Darai retroflex consonants as “alveolar”, a description which I believe to be phonetically inaccurate. At any rate, the ostensibly alveolar sounds are transcribed with the conventional Indological symbols for retroflex consonants, i.e. with a subscript dot. For the most part, the chosen phonological transcription of the Darai language employs the conventional symbols that are also used in standard Indological transliteration, albeit with the *h* in digraphs representing “aspirated” consonants appearing as a superscript, viz. *k*, *k<sup>h</sup>*, *g*, *g<sup>h</sup>*, *c*, *c<sup>h</sup>*, *t*, *t<sup>h</sup>*, *ḍ*, *ḍ<sup>h</sup>*, *ṭ*, *ṭ<sup>h</sup>*, *d*, *d<sup>h</sup>*, *n*, *p*, *p<sup>h</sup>*, *b*, *b<sup>h</sup>*, *m*, *r*, *l*, *s*, *h*.

However, Dhakal chooses other symbols for five consonants. The choice of the engma <ŋ> for the velar nasal is logical and better suited to a transcribed text corpus than the <ṇ> of Indological convention. In addition, Dhakal chooses to transcribe as <w> and <j> the sounds which are conventionally transcribed in the Indological tradition as <v> and <y>. The choice for <w> is defensible because both Nepali and Darai lack the distinctive [u] sound which is heard in prestige varieties of Hindi. The choice of the symbol <j> instead of <y> for the palatal glide [j] is potentially more problematic because it necessitates finding another symbol for the affricates that are conventionally transcribed as <j> and <jh>. Consequently, Dhakal represents the latter affricates as <dz> and <dz<sup>h</sup>

respectively. The choice of <j> for <y> caters more to linguistic fashion than Indological tradition, and necessitates that a word which would conventionally be rendered as *rājye* now be transcribed instead as *radzje* (p. 81).

Since most scholars dealing with languages of the Subcontinent have been imbued with, or at least amply exposed to, the conventions of Indological transliteration, Dhakal's choice with respect to the palatal glide leads to demonstrable inconsistency in transcription for one and the same item, e.g. Harmanija (p. 47), Harmaniya (p. 53) and Harmania (p. 9). The phonological transcription *harmānija* would correspond to a Devanāgarī transliteration *harmaniyā*. Because the sounds that are conventionally represented as <j> and <jh> are phonetically realised respectively as [dʒ] and [dʒʰ], this orthographical choice is defensible. However, since the same applies *mutatis mutandis* for their voiceless counterparts, which are conventionally transcribed as <c> and <ch> and realised respectively as [tʃ] and [tʃʰ], the choice for the symbols <dz> and <dzʰ> introduces inconsistency into the system of transcription chosen for Darai.

The vowel sounds of Darai are transcribed as *i*, *e*, *ə*, *a*, *o* *u*, and this inventory of symbols could also be used adequately to transcribe the Nepali monophthongal phoneme inventory. Nepali orthography has inherited orthographical distinctions which modern Nepali phonology has not retained. The sounds which are written in Devanāgarī with *dirgha* *ī* and *ū* in Nepali are the same phonemes respectively as those written in Nepali with *hrasva* *i* and *u*. The sound written in Devanāgarī as <a> is [ə], and the sound written as <ā> is [a].

Dhakal provides no information on the status of diphthongs, however. Nepali has two monosyllabic diphthongs <ai> [ai] and <au> [au], which behave differently than disyllabic or trisyllabic sequences of vowels do in the language. We might expect Darai to be likely to behave in a phonologically similar fashion, but we are left to conjecture about the precise status of entities which are transcribed in the corpus as <əi> (pp. 30, 45, *passim*), <əi> (p. 48), <əu> (p. 48), <ou> (p. 40), <aũ> (p. 45) and so forth. Until the nature of Darai syllable structure and the status of Darai [h] are understood, we cannot evaluate apparent distinctions such as Darai *Dəsəhī* (p. 76) vs. Nepali *Daśāī*. In sum, therefore, the phonological transcription used for the Darai texts appears to be largely conservative and satisfactory, although phonological issues remain to be clarified.

In contradistinction to the Darai text corpus, the haphazard *ad hoc* romanisation of Nepali words presents a problem, since Nepali is used quite a lot in the glosses and the translations. Fortunately, the Darai text itself allows those readers who are unfamiliar with the Nepali language to figure out that “kattha” (p. 27) is actually *kaṭṭhā*, “pindo” (p. 44) is actually *pinḍo*, “kajiya” (p. 43) is actually *kajiyā*, and “makai bhutne budho” (p. 69) is actually *makai bhuṭne*

*budho*. For some terms, however, a reader who does not happen to be familiar with Nepali might not be able to ascertain what the phonological forms of Nepali lexical items are, even though these could be relevant, as in the case of the discussion on the provenance of the ethnonym Darai itself. In the same vein, the author's name in Indological transliteration would be rendered as Dubi Nanda Ḍhakāl. The consistent use of conventional transliteration for Nepali lexical items would enable all readers to reconstitute the original Devanāgarī orthography and so to ascertain the phonological form of the Nepali. In this sense, the Nepali language deserves the same care and respect as the Darai language.

In total, Dhakal supplies us with eight Darai texts: Bhothi fish (28 pages in length), Death ritual (5 pp.), Harmanija parrot (10½ pp.), How to make beer (6½ pp.), Interview (13½ pp.), King and Queens (22 pp.), Past to present (10 pp.), and Self-immolation (16½ pp.). The fifth text, entitled “Interview” on p. 65, is referred to as “Conversation” on p. 9. This valuable text as well as the text on the Harmanija parrot, whose name, as we have seen, is phonologically transcribed as [hərmənija], were not collected by the author himself, but by Mangal Ram Darai, whom the author credits with the recordings on p. 9 and again on p. 65. There is no photograph of Mangal Ram Darai in the book, nor is there a photograph of the author, but the author provides three photographs of his principal informants (p. 8) for the six texts which the author recorded himself. All eight texts were transcribed by the author, and all eight texts follow the standard trilinear format, consisting of a phonological transcription and below this a morpheme gloss and below this a line with the English translation.

The fifth text collected by Mangal Ram Darai and entitled “Interview” or “Conversation” contains an interesting tradition about the Darai homeland, as related by an elderly Darai woman. The text mentions the district of Citvan “Chitwan” in Darai [citəvən], where most Darai settlements can be found, as well as the districts Parsā and Tanahū. The tradition recounts an historical link to a possible homeland in the hills in the nearby district of Lamjuṅg [ləmdzɯŋ] and also makes reference to the existence of sovereign polities of yore in the Terai. In addition to distinguishing their own Ṭhakurī caste, the Darai, according to the text, also distinguish the four *thər* “clans, castes or septs”: [hāndikale], [bənpale], [tʰulicəure], [bədḡhəre] (p. 71).

Chapter 4 contains five proverbs, three riddles and a few observations on the use of the first person plural ending <-hī> and the infinitive <-ike> in discourse. In the texts, there are a few spelling errors. For example, “self-immolation” should be self-immolation (p. 123), and “embryo” should be spelt twice as embryo (p. 81), although it is evident from the Darai text that what is intended is “womb” and not “embryo”. Dhakal's 1½-page bibliography

is the most complete list of references on the Darai language compiled to date. Nevertheless, the following important sources on Darai grammar are missing from the bibliography: Darāi (VS 2043); Davāḍi (VS 2040); van Driem (2001) (see esp. pp. 1168–1171); Kotapish (1973); and Kotapish and Kotapish (1975). It can only be hoped that, after this major contribution to the documentation of the Darai language, Dhakal will go on to produce a detailed grammatical study of the Darai language as well.

## References

- Darāi, Lakṣmaṇ. VS 2043 [i.e. AD 1986–1987]. *Darāi bhāṣā*. Jagatpur: Rāmu Darāi.
- Davāḍi, Madan Prasād. VS 2040 Caitra 25 [i.e. AD 1984]. *Darai bhāṣāko adhyayan*. M.A. thesis, Bhairavā Campus of Tribhuvan University.
- van Driem, George. 2001. *Languages of the Himalayas*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hodgson, Brian Houghton. 1857. Comparative vocabulary of the languages of the broken tribes of Népāl. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. xxvi. 317–371.
- Grierson, George Abraham. 1916. *The linguistic survey of India (Volume IX: Indo-Aryan family central group, Part IV: Specimens of the Pahārī languages and Gujurī)*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India.
- Kotapish, Sharon. 1973. Darai cases. In Austin Hale (ed.), *Collected papers on Khaling, Kulunge, Darai, Newari, Chitwan Tharu*, 27–38. Kirtipur: Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies.
- Kotapish, Carl & Sharon Kotapish. 1975. *A Darai-English, English-Darai glossary*. Kathmandu: Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies of Tribhuvan University.